



# A Balkan Tangle

THE STORY OF A ROYAL COURTSHIP

BY

ELEANOR M. INGRAM\*

---

"HAVE a cigarette, *mon cher*, and sit down," said the King, without looking up.

I obeyed, and surveyed him through the surrounding haze of smoke as he scribbled rapid notes on the margin of a formidable document before him.

"There," he said at last, leaning back in his chair with a sigh of relief, "that is finished. Why do you wear that uniform, my cousin; it makes me suffocate to look at you?"

"Since you sent for me in haste, Sire."

He laughed.

"And then kept you waiting five minutes. It is a sad world!"

"It is certainly a hot one," I observed.

"The next one will be more so," he said sweetly. "But pray share the benefits of your American education with me; the heat has given me a headache."

I gave him a look of reproach.

"And I have ridden two miles in the sun at noon because no one in the palace can make a cocktail, Sire?"

"There is ice on the little table," he returned languidly. "The cocktail

\*All Rights Reserved.

is a mere detail, *mon cher*. I sent for you because I am about to marry and I am not sure whom."

"As nearly as I can remember, that deplorable state of affairs has existed for two years."

"It will probably exist for twenty-two unless I cut the Gordian knot," he retorted.

"You will marry Countess Antonia?" I asked, pausing in my operations to look at him.

"Not if I can help it."

"Then——"

"No, it is not the duchess either. Still less, in fact. Antonia is disagreeable, but the duchess is insupportable."

"They are both considered handsome," I argued.

"Do you consider them handsome?" he demanded,

I set the glass before him.

"Your cocktail, Sire."

"Do you?" he persisted.

"Tastes differ, Sire."

"Exactly," he said drily.

There was a moment's pause while he turned his glass round and round in evident abstraction, and I meditated on the disadvantages of being a king whose rival ministers have daughters.

"If I were at liberty to choose a foreigner," he said abruptly, "but being compelled by law to marry one of my own subjects——"

"It prevents outside aggression," I remarked.

"And encourages inside. One of the two factions must be bitterly offended and the other raised to more power than I like, unless——unless——"

I looked at him inquiringly.

"Unless I marry a lady whose connections belong to neither side."

"Impossible, Sire!" I exclaimed. "The country is divided into factions; no one escapes. At least no one of suitable rank."

"What a pity you were not a girl, Paul," he said, contemplating me regretfully. "We should have been so congenial and really, pardon my frankness, you would have made a very good-looking queen indeed. Fate is unkind sometimes!"

"That depends on the point of view," I answered.

I knew my royal cousin well enough to guess that a serious meaning lay beneath the surface of his mood.

"You would not like to be a girl?" he said lightly. "I have wished I were after an interview with Kalrov. However, if you are not able to be my wife you can at least help me to find one."

"I, Sire?"

"You, *mon cher*. I propose to send you in search of her this very afternoon."

I smiled incredulously.

"You do not believe me?" he continued, gazing at me through half-closed eyes. "Very well, I will convince you; the lady is Mademoiselle Borisof. She is at present about twenty-five miles from Valente, and no one but you and I myself has even thought of her in this light. Wait; she is also what you have claimed does not exist: she is a person of suitable rank without party connections. Her father, Count Borisof, has been our envoy to the United States for ten years, and has lost all track of our inner complications. He returned to Balka only a week ago. It is ideal."

"It would be a coup," I said, recovering my breath slowly. "It would stir the country, Sire."

"I hope so," he answered. "I will not be a puppet for either Kalrov or the others. I will have my own way; but I must first know what way it is. Here you can aid me, my cousin."

"You wish me to carry the proposal to Count Borisof?" I asked.

"No," he said sharply. "I wish you to find out something of mademoiselle. Good heavens! do you think I will marry in absolute ignorance of my future wife? She may be as stupid as the duchess and as ugly as Antonia. No, you will go to visit her father; you will see her and you will write to me. If your report is favorable, I will telegraph and you will then acquaint them with my proposal."

"In other words, Sire, I am to assume the responsibility of choosing another man's wife, and that man my king. I beg to be excused."

"Oh, I have every confidence in your taste, my dear Paul," he answered coolly.

"It is not a question of my taste, but of yours," I retorted.

"You should know my taste by this time," he returned. "We have hardly been separated since we were children."

"There is too much risk of a mistake," I said indignantly. "Suppose I write that she is charming, the arrangements are made, mademoiselle comes to Valente, and you do not agree with me."

"Then send me her portrait first, *mon ami*; you sketch to perfection. Do you expect me to go myself, like the fairy princes, disguised as a pedler or a pet dog, or some other pleasing creature? Be reasonable; and start to-night."

"And if I emulate H——, Sire, and flatter the portrait so you do not recognize mademoiselle?"

"Then I will give you a poisoned cigarette, my cousin," he said, pushing the tray toward me.

I took one and lit it sulkily, while he watched me with twinkling eyes.

"You will go?" he demanded.

"Since you insist, Sire."

"Good; I thought you would. Fortunately Count Borisof is suffering from a broken leg and you can carry him my sympathy as an excuse for your visit. In case the lady is undesirable it can end there. Here are your credentials."

And slipping off his signet ring he gave it to me.

I put it on my finger and rose.

"I will start at once. You have nothing further to say to me?"

"Nothing, except my thanks," he said gravely. "I would trust no one else, Paul."

That was putting the subject in a new light and I flushed a little.

"How soon must I decide?"

"Within a week. I could decide in seven minutes, but I give you seven days." He laughed as he spoke, and I smiled myself as I opened the door.

"Good luck," he added.

"For both our sakes, Sire," I retorted.

At the head of the great staircase I paused a moment to arrange my plans. I was not exactly accustomed to the rôle of Paris for someone else's Helen. It occurred to me that it would save a great deal of trouble if Mademoiselle Borisof was hopelessly ugly.

"Your Highness has chosen a dangerous place for meditation," said a thin voice behind me, "a single misstep——"

I swung round abruptly.

"Ah, but I do not intend to make the misstep, baron," I said, recognizing Kalrov himself.

He smiled rather maliciously.

"Those things are not always voluntary, your Highness. But I am detaining you, perhaps, from something interesting."

"Very interesting; I am going home to lunch," I answered, putting my hand on the balustrade of the stairs.

The minister glanced down carelessly, then raised his eyes to my face with keen eagerness.

"No further than that, your Highness?" he demanded.

"Afterward I may ride if it is not too hot. Why?"

He again looked down.

"Your Highness is wearing the King's signet," he suggested.

"It is not for the first time, baron," I said lightly, although I mentally

anathematized my carelessness as I followed his gaze to the great emerald flashing on my hand.

"Very true, nor the last, I trust," he returned. "But not usually without an object, your Highness."

I regarded him with a frankness for which I blush.

"Exactly. There can be no harm in telling you, my dear baron, that I am going incognito to arrange a little difficulty with the German consul at Iptone. You have heard of it?"

"Yes, but I believed it unimportant," he said uncertainly.

"That is the King's affair; I do not pretend to be a diplomat," I answered. "Good morning, baron, my lunch is already delayed."

And nodding pleasantly to him, I descended the stairs, leaving him looking thoughtfully after me as he leaned on his cane. Once out of his sight I drew on my gloves to prevent other comments and went home at once. There I wrote a hurried note to Cyrian, explaining what I had been forced to tell Kalrov. I could imagine my liege lord's satisfaction in still further misleading his dictatorial minister.

In spite of the heat I thought it safest to ride the twenty-five miles to Count Borisof's residence, and about four o'clock I left Valente. At the same time I sent a servant to reserve a compartment in the evening train to Iptone, in case Kalrov should make inquiries.

On the road I gave some consideration as to whether I should tell Count Borisof my own name. I had a strong dislike to theatrical complications, but on the other hand, if the fact that I was visiting the count reached Valente it would set Kalrov thinking. None better than he at putting two and two together! In the end I announced to Pierre, my solitary attendant, that for the present I was Colonel Delmar of the Imperial Guards. The rest of the trip I employed myself speaking to him suddenly and teaching him not to answer "Highness."

I regret to say he was incredibly stupid.

Naturally it was late when we arrived at the little village and I went to the inn for the rest of the night. There I found out from the host that Count Borisof had not one, but two daughters. Two, I groaned mentally. Which had Cyrian meant, or did he know there was more than one?

I went to bed in despair, and contrary to my expectations slept soundly until I was awakened by Pierre's voice.

"Your Highness will observe that it is nine o'clock."

I contemplated him in the silence of exasperation.

"If you call me that again I shall send you back to Valente," I said finally. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, High—, that is, monsieur," he stammered.

"Well, remember it," I said grimly.

He did not repeat it more than twice while I was dressing, and during breakfast I avoided speaking to him.

Afterward I lit a cigar—I never smoked anyone's cigarettes but Cyrian's—and set out for the château, a large gray building on a slope of the mountain overlooking the village. So sleepily quiet was the atmosphere of it all that I could well believe Kalrov and the court were matters that troubled it little.

A stout peasant admitted me to the grounds and volunteered the information that his master was better.

I was glad to hear it, and rode on slowly. The gardens were charming; to the right a little stream ran alongside of the path, and farther over I caught a glimpse of a rustic bridge on which a lady was walking. She carried a rose-colored parasol aggravatingly tilted between us so that I could see nothing but her slight figure.

"One Mademoiselle Borisof," I said to myself.

She did not turn or look in my direction in spite of the noise made by our horses' hoofs on the gravel. I wondered what she would have done if she had known my errand. At the foot of the steps I left my horse with Pierre and ascending, dropped a quaint knocker that hung on one half the door. The other half was open, and I saw through it a square hall strewn with wolf and bear skins and decorated with guns and swords fastened against the walls. Evidently the count had been fond of hunting.

I gave my card to the old servant who appeared.

"Count Borisof?" I asked.

He hesitated, then saying he would see, placed a chair for me and withdrew.

I remained gazing out the door trying to find the pink parasol until the soft rustle of silk aroused me.

"Colonel Delmar?" a clear voice inquired.

I turned hastily.

"A thousand pardons, mademoiselle, the beauty of your gardens distracted me."

She smiled. "We are very proud of them," she said simply. "Will you sit down, colonel?"

I bowed, not quite sure whether I was relieved or disappointed to find her impossible from Cyrian's point of view.

Grave and dignified in her dark dress, with her dark hair coiled low and her dark eyes looking out from under heavy brows and lashes, the second Mademoiselle Borisof was not ugly, but she bore a perilous resemblance to the Countess Antonia.

"You wished to see my father," she was saying, "and I know how much pleasure it would give him, but to-day it is quite impossible. He

has been very ill and, although he is better, doctor has ordered absolute quietness for to-day. If you could remain with us until he is stronger we would be delighted."

"You are very good, mademoiselle," I answered. "I will accept gratefully if you are certain a guest will not be an inconvenience in a house of illness. I had intended stopping at the inn, since I cannot leave without seeing Count Borisof. The King has sent me to convey his sympathy."

She made a movement of surprise and pleasure.

"We are honored," she said. "Indeed my father would be most displeased if you left us, Colonel Delmar. Mama is asleep at present, but she will repeat my welcome at lunch. Would you like to rest after your ride, or will you come into the garden and meet my sister?"

"The garden, by all means, mademoiselle," I answered promptly.

She laughed, and throwing a lace scarf over her head led the way. I followed with some curiosity, reflecting on the fate that had prevented this very charming lady from being a queen by giving her the same type of beauty as a woman the King especially detested.

Through the trees I perceived the rose-colored parasol and indicated it to my companion. She nodded.

"Yes, that is her favorite seat, near the bridge. I thought we should find her there."

At the sound of our voices the parasol wavered and its owner rising, turned to face us. Fortunately we were still a short distance from her, for I was too startled to speak.

In all Balka, in all Europe, there could have been no one else so perfectly, so ideally suited to Cyrian. All rose and snow she seemed, except for the dark eyes and brows that contrasted with the masses of golden hair piled on her little head. Tall and slight, even as she stood silently waiting for us her pose and glance told of an energy and spirit quite foreign to our more placid women.

"Irenya, this is Colonel Delmar of papa's former regiment, who will be our guest for a few days at least," said my companion. "Colonel Delmar, my sister."

Mademoiselle Irenya held out her hand like an American girl and smiled at me frankly.

"You are really from Valente, monsieur?" she asked. "Imagine that I have never been in Balka since I was a little child, and now that I am here I see nothing. Tell us what it is like, this country of ours, and earn our undying gratitude."

She sat down as she spoke, drawing her sister down beside her and

tilting the parasol over them both. I took possession of a campstool opposite and looked into her eager eyes.

"Where shall I commence, mademoiselle? The most charming place in Balka is here, the most disagreeable is Valente."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because it is hot—unbearably hot."

"I wonder if it is hotter than New York?" she mused.

"I believe it is," I answered.

"Were you ever in New York, monsieur?" Mademoiselle Borisof inquired.

"Oh, yes, in '98," I said, off my guard for a moment.

Mademoiselle Irenya opened her eyes.

"Why, that was the year Prince Paul visited the United States!" she exclaimed. "Do you remember, Dorine, how angry we were because he did not come to Washington while we were there?"

"I was a member of his suite," I hastened to say.

"Is he nice?" she asked.

"I get along with him very well," I returned uneasily.

She regarded me severely.

"That is not a polite way to speak of him. Do you 'get along very well' with the King, too?" with sarcasm.

"Irenya!" said her sister reprovingly.

"The King is different," I replied, seizing the opportunity to begin my mission. "The King commands the respect of all who surround him. Brilliant, firm and just, he is adored in Balka, mademoiselle." It sounded rather like a copybook, but my intentions were of the best.

"You are as ardent a royalist as Irenya, Colonel Delmar," said Mademoiselle Borisof, smiling. "She keeps a photograph of the King in her room and believes him everything good and charming."

I looked across at Irenya, not quite so pleased as I should have been, and meeting my eyes she colored and closed the parasol abruptly.

"My sister exaggerates, monsieur," she said. "Is it not natural that a girl who had not seen her native country since she was eight years old should feel a deep interest in everything belonging to it?"

"Perfectly natural, mademoiselle, and the King is all you imagined him," I answered quietly.

There was a short silence; Mademoiselle Borisof regarded me thoughtfully and Irenya dug little holes in the grass with the point of her parasol. One diminutive foot in a high-heeled, silver-buckled shoe was visible beneath the pink ruffles, I noticed. Both Antonia and the duchess had large feet and wore English boots. For the first time in my life I began to envy Cyrian.

"Pardon my curiosity, monsieur," said Mademoiselle Borisof suddenly, "but are you not very young to hold the colonelship of the Guards? I met Lieutenant Dimitre once and I remember his hair was quite gray. Is he an exception?"

"No, mademoiselle, I believe I am the exception," I replied, and as she still looked at me questioningly, I added with some hesitation, rather unnecessary considering it was the first really true remark I had made for some time. "I hold it for family reasons, and I won the Order of St. Michael in the African campaign."

Irenya's eyes widened and her sister looked distressed.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I should not have asked."

"Your question is one any stranger would ask, mademoiselle," I answered, unable to remove my gaze from Irenya as she looked at me with parted lips and glowing cheeks. Mademoiselle Borisof glanced at her also and rose.

"It is almost time for lunch; we had better go in," she suggested.

We walked together to the house, Irenya allowing me to shade her with the parasol, which cast a rosy shadow about her in the noonday sun. The little shoes flashed in and out enchantingly. I observed they were tied with pink ribbons when we came to the steps.

At lunch I was presented to the Countess Borisof, a stately woman very like Irenya, only her hair was in soft white curls instead of golden. She told me I might not be able to see the count for a couple of days and repeated the invitation to stay.

I was not in particular haste to see my host and conclude my visit; on the contrary. Although the first glance at Irenya had been sufficient for me, I thought it desirable to find how much her tastes agreed with Cyrian's. That very night, after I had gone to my room, I made half a dozen sketches of her and tore them up as wretchedly inadequate. I would study her more closely the next day, I decided, as I fell asleep.

But in the morning she appeared before me all in white, with distracting scarlet ribbons in unexpected places, and before this new aspect I was obliged to commence all over again. My sketches seemed poorer than ever.

She showed me her favorite kitten and sat petting it all the morning while she talked to me. I learned that Mademoiselle Borisof wrote novels under the *nom-de-plume* of Jeanneton, and that Irenya herself was passionately fond of music. I could not help thinking it a pity that Cyrian's favorite music was a brass band.

But I found out gradually there were many phases of her character with which he would have no sympathy, not that he would find them annoying, simply he would not notice them. In all probability she would

make an inimitable queen, gentle and dignified, with enough occupations of her own to prevent her from interfering in politics. That was all Cyrian wanted, I reflected bitterly.

For by the end of the second day I could no longer conceal the fact from myself—I loved Irenya. Who could have helped it, seeing her as I saw her in all her adorable innocence and dainty grace?

And because I loved her I would not let even the week given me elapse, but drew her portrait with such skill as I possessed and wrote to Cyrian of her twin loveliness of mind and body.

I enclosed a photograph of Mademoiselle Borisof which I had taken from the library table, and said briefly that she was very gracious and the author of the novels signed Jeanneton.

When the letter was safely on its way I went back to my last few hours with Irenya. It was two days, however, before the King's answer reached me, and the sisters devoted themselves to amusing me, apparently under the delusion that I must find it very dull away from Valente. We walked in the garden, under Irenya's parasol, we read aloud, and in the evenings Irenya played for me as only she could play. Sometimes madame appeared, not often. She was usually with the count, who was rapidly improving. Indeed, I could have seen him if necessary, but I insisted on waiting until he was quite himself. They were very grateful for what they called my consideration, and I was too reckless to care what they would think afterward. Probably Irenya would never think of it at all when she realized that she was called to share the throne of the king around whom she had woven her girlish romances.

I was sitting by the brook with them when Cyrian's letter arrived. It was brought by one of my own orderlies and I felt his curious eyes upon my face as I rose to receive the message. I had always suspected him of too much friendship for Kalrov and I dismissed him now with a curt word, although if Cyrian's letter contained what I expected it would be too late for the minister to interfere.

"You will excuse me?" I said, turning to the sisters.

"We will have to," Irenya retorted, glancing at the royal seal.

I smiled at her, and walked slowly back to the house.

In the hall madame met me.

"Will you come now to the count, Colonel Delmar?" she asked. "He is most anxious to see you this morning."

I held up the letter in answer.

"I have just received a message from the King, madame. With your permission I will visit Count Borisof in half an hour."

"At any time, colonel," she said pleasantly, and passed on into the garden while I went to lock myself in my room.

I wanted to be alone a few minutes, to collect the thoughts slipping away from me, before opening the letter. Through the window I could see madame talking to her daughters, telling them, doubtless, of the count's improvement, for Irenya was clapping her little hands joyously. I turned away resolutely, and picking up the envelope, tore it open.

It was characteristic of Cyrian to write lightly of the event that would leave Balka breathless.

MY DEAR PAUL (he said) :

You see I was right in leaving my affairs in your hands; behold me free from my two "*Bêtes noires*." Mademoiselle Borisof is charming. Some day I will tell you how she seems already a familiar image to me and why your letter has given me hope of a happiness rarely found in a state marriage. Immediately on receiving this you will lay my proposal before Count Borisof. If he accepts, I would desire the family to come to Valente as soon as possible. I reserve my thanks until I see you, *mon ami*, and am as ever,

Your loving cousin,

CYRIAN R.

I read it twice, then rose and went downstairs. After all I had nothing to complain of, since through me the two people I cared for would be happy.

I found Count Borisof waiting for me. Rather to my surprise he was sitting up in a great armchair, and though still pale, evidently almost well. We shook hands heartily, taking, I think, an instant liking to each other.

"I am really ashamed, Colonel Delmar," he said in a full rich voice that recalled his eldest daughter's; "madame has persuaded us all that I was dangerously ill and I fear we have sadly wasted your time among us."

"My visit has been a great pleasure to me," I answered. "Indeed, I am very glad to find you so much better; it was to convey his Majesty's sympathy for your accident that I first came."

"I am greatly honored," he said, a faint flush rising to his cheeks. "I did not imagine his Majesty would remember so well one of the last generation. He was only a youth when I left Balka, ten years ago."

"He is twenty-seven now," I said, hesitating how to commence my mission, "and the next important action before him is his marriage."

The count nodded.

"That is always a step to be carefully considered, colonel."

"Especially for a king. I have only told you part of my errand, Count Borisof; Mademoiselle Irenya——" I paused, realizing my abruptness, yet feverishly eager to finish the task.

He looked at me, smiling quizzically.

"Well, colonel; Irenya——"

In desperation I held out Cyrian's letter.

He took it with an air of surprise, and after turning it over once or twice slowly unfolded it. His face changed at the first lines and as he continued, amazement, pleasure and incredulity struggled in his expression. When he finally laid the paper down I rose from my chair and saluted him formally.

"Count Borisof, I have the distinguished honor to ask the hand of Mademoiselle Irenya for his Majesty, King Cyrian of Balka."

He drew a long breath.

"Then you, monsieur?"

"I am Paul of Ivral," I answered steadily. A vase of pink roses stood on the table and I could not take my eyes from them. To this hour I cannot see a pink rose without thinking of Irenya that first day and hearing the ripple of the tiny brook.

The count struck a bell at his side.

"I need not tell your Highness my reply to such an honor as the King has conferred upon us," he said with frank pride. "But Irenya must answer too. Mademoiselle Irenya," he added to the servant who appeared.

I had not expected this, to be forced to witness her joy and wonder; I had meant to leave at once. For the moment I hated them all; Cyrian, Count Borisof, even Irenya herself. It was on my lips to say I would leave him to tell her alone, then the idea of how strange it would seem restrained me and I was silent.

There was a soft rustle of silken skirts without and in spite of myself I watched the door eagerly as she entered. She blushed deeply in returning my bow, perhaps not expecting to find me there, but her father left her no time for thought.

"Irenya," he said, "my dear child, a great honor has come to you. I scarcely know how to communicate it; your hand has been asked in marriage by—" he paused, looking at her, and she looked at him with wide, brilliant eyes—"by his Majesty the King. Prince Paul of Ivral has come as ambassador to bring this proposal and will convey your answer to the King. My dear, you are faint. I have told you too suddenly. I will call your mother!"

I sprang forward to offer her a chair, but she stopped me with a gesture.

"No, father," she said with such firmness that he withdrew his hand from the bell in spite of her pallor, "not yet, please. Let me understand, this is Prince Paul?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Then I will thank him for the happiness he has brought me, and beg him to acquaint the King with my grateful acceptance."

The color rushed back to her face as she spoke and she turned to me with as stately a command as Cyrian himself, her long dark lashes sweeping her cheek, her slight figure drawn to its full height. A wave of bitter anger rose over me that she should assume the queen this way; that our pretty friendship should not last beyond the announcement of her new dignity.

"I shall obey your wish, mademoiselle," I answered coldly.

She bent her head and moved to the door. I opened it and she passed out without lifting her eyes.

The arrangements of detail I concluded with the count as briefly as possible, but the afternoon slipped through my fingers. By the time I escaped from Count Borisof and wrote the necessary letter to Cyrian it had grown so late that I was forced to remain for dinner.

Irenya did not appear, to my relief. Probably she was dreaming of her future grandeur. The countess was radiant and preserved the dinner from hopeless dulness, for I was worn out and Mademoiselle Borisof distraite. She seemed tired too, I fancied. Afterward we went into the salon and I excused myself to smoke a cigar on the balcony. It was a moonlight night, one of those July nights when the air seems quivering with restless, unseen life, yet is almost painfully still. The gardens below were fairylike in their soft lights and shadows, and leaning against a pillar I let my cigar go out as I gazed at the rustic bridge where Irenya had stood that first time.

I was roused by a step behind me and turned to find Mademoiselle Borisof.

"I have come to bid you good-night," she said, her eyes wandering indifferently over the scene before us.

"It is good-by, mademoiselle," I answered. "May I ask you to offer my excuses to madame and your sister? I start very early."

She looked at me suddenly, her eyes blazing, her whole face darkened by an intensity of wrath of which I could not have believed her capable.

"I will carry Irenya no message from you," she said fiercely. "I pray that you will be punished, that you will suffer as she does. I hope that when she is queen she will wreck your ambitions, humiliate you and crush your pride as you have hers. How dared you, Paul of Ivral, steal into our house under a false name——" she broke off, suffocated by her suppressed vehemence.

"What do you mean?" I demanded, absolutely stunned. "Mademoiselle, what have I done? You yourself told me Irenya's admiration of the King and she accepted voluntarily. Ah," as a new idea flashed

across my mind, "you do not mean—it cannot be that she loved someone else?"

She met my gaze strangely, the passion dying out of her face.

"Yes," she answered. "She loved someone else."

I turned away my head for a moment.

"You have your wish, mademoiselle," I said quietly. "If I have acted thoughtlessly I am punished, for I love your sister. But my suffering need not—shall not include hers. Cyrian is generous, and by starting at once I can reach Valente as soon as the letter. He will release her and she can marry the man she loves."

Mademoiselle sank upon a bench, the tears rolling down her face.

"You cannot ask the King that," she answered in a low voice. "Forgive what I said; I did not understand. Irenya loves you, monseigneur."

Balcony and garden reeled in a silver haze before me.

"It cannot be true," I said.

"It *is* true. She thought you wooed her for yourself. When she found you with her father this afternoon she believed it was you who asked her hand. Think how you have lingered here day after day, you who must have a thousand duties to call you to Valente; and ask yourself if it was not natural. What did you expect? The first young Balkan she has known, your dark beauty, the glamor of battle around you; and shut up together in this country-house! Oh, I do not know which was the maddest, the King or you." She broke into a hysterical laugh and hid her face against the board railing.

"And I can do nothing, nothing," I said.

Mademoiselle raised her head.

"There is one thing you can do, monseigneur. You can tell her of your love. No," as I made a movement of protest, "there is no disloyalty; it is the humiliation of giving her love unsought that hurts so deeply. You *must* tell her, monseigneur."

"It is not honorable," I said, too shaken to trust my own impulses. "It is not fair to the King, mademoiselle."

"And has Irenya no right? Must she be sacrificed to your narrow honor?" she retorted.

I hesitated before the appeal and she leaned forward, watching me.

Cyrian or Irenya? I clenched my hands in the struggle. Then quite suddenly the echo of a familiar voice was in my ears, laughing yet earnest beneath the surface: "You see, I would trust no one else, Paul." The mists cleared away.

"It is impossible, mademoiselle," I said firmly.

Before she could reply the heavy curtains behind us were pushed aside and a white figure appeared between them.

"There is no need of telling me," said Irenya gently; "I have heard, Dorine."

She spoke to her sister, but she looked at me. Not sadly, not reproachfully, but with all good thoughts meeting in her clear, unfaltering eyes. It came to me that we would take our diverging paths and walk them bravely and cheerfully, sure of finding each other at the end.

"Mademoiselle, can you forgive the grief I have unwillingly brought you?" I asked, my own voice sounding hushed and strange.

"You said you cared for me," she answered. "I can remember nothing else."

"I love you with all my heart; I shall love you always," I said. "You understand why I must go to-night, why I may say no more than this."

"I understand," she replied steadily.

"As there is no one else who could. Dearest and loveliest, when I see you again it will be in Valente; I think even Cyrian would let me touch your hand."

She held out both hands, her delicate lips quivering.

"I think he would," she whispered. "Good-by, monsieur."

I clasped the little fingers for an instant, not daring to raise them to my lips.

"Good-by, mademoiselle."

As I rode away I turned to look up at the balcony, and I saw distinctly the glint of moonlight on her golden hair.

Three days later I rode into Ivral and shut out the world for a while. I would not even have the newspapers brought to me; I did not wish to read of Irenya's reception, her beauty, Cyrian's devotion and the political situation. Of course I would have to go back eventually and play my part in the theatrical court wedding, but I wanted a few weeks alone. In the letter containing Irenya's acceptance I had told Cyrian that affairs on my estates demanded my personal attention.

My ancestral residence was decidedly a gloomy place to live in solitude. I soon discovered. It was the first time I had visited it without at least a few guests. Cyrian very seldom permitted me to remain long from Valente.

From the anxious and perturbed air of my household I gathered that an impression prevailed that the King was displeased with me and had accordingly sent me to Ivral. I took to long rides through the pine woods, leaving in the morning and not returning until dinner. Old Stephan ventured a feeble remonstrance, but I silenced him curtly. After that he confined himself to standing behind my chair at dinner and sighing explosively over the brevity of my repasts. It was absurd, but I

## A BALKAN TANGLE

affected not to hear rather than send him away. The great empty dining-room was sufficiently depressing as it was.

One night when I came in particularly late I found him waiting on the steps, his white hair blowing in the wind.

"I have been waiting for monseigneur two hours," he announced as I came up.

"What for?" I demanded impatiently.

He opened the door, and taking a tray from the table offered it to me triumphantly.

"A telegram for monseigneur," he said with pride.

I tore it open and read the single line.

Come to Valente at once.

CYRIAN.

I gave a savage exclamation, and crumpling the paper to a ball dropped it at the stupefied Stephan's feet. He drew back mechanically as I turned into the library and slammed the door shut.

That after all my work Cyrian could not give me a single week! Kallrov was restive, probably, or one of the rejected ladies was making trouble. I would not go, I decided sullenly. My cousin was masterful enough to manage his kingdom without my assistance. I had earned a vacation.

But, nevertheless, I regained my common sense at the end of half an hour and ordered the carriage for the first train. There was no escaping Cyrian; if I sent word I was ill he would very likely come to Ivral with a corps of physicians.

Not until I stopped in the hall to draw on my gloves did it occur to me that Cyrian's ring was still on my finger. No wonder he sent for me.

"Stephan, did you save that telegram?" I asked.

He brought it with so rueful a face that I could not help smiling.

"There is nothing wrong," I said kindly. "Perhaps I will return soon, Stephan. Be ready for me."

"We are always ready for monseigneur," he answered, brightening, and stood watching me as I held the paper to a lamp.

I had treated Cyrian's message rather unceremoniously, and did not care to leave it for curious eyes.

The long drive to the station and the still longer ride in the slow

train were wearisome to the last degree. Unable to read in the wretched light, I could do nothing but look out the windows and think, the occupation I most wished to avoid. When we pulled into Valente in the early morning I was tired enough to remember that I had forgotten dinner the night before. My own carriage was not there, of course, and I waited on the platform while Pierre found a cab.

Opposite the station stands the Parnassus Club, and as I studied it idly the door swung open and Kalrov came out. He saw me at once and crossed the street.

"Your Highness is back from Iptone?" he asked with an unpleasant sneer.

"Exactly, my dear baron," I returned. "I have hastened back to congratulate the King upon his approaching marriage."

"It is singular your Highness chose to return on a train going toward Iptone."

"Very singular," I said serenely; "I see my carriage has arrived, baron. Shall I wish you good morning, or will you accompany me to the palace?"

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing like a cat's.

"I would not detain your Highness an instant from such a pleasant interview. The King has been telegraphing everywhere in his affectionate anxiety to find you at once."

"I am sorry to have occasioned so much trouble," I replied indifferently.

He scowled after me helplessly, but his last shot had told. I absolutely paled before a new idea. Suppose Mademoiselle Borisof, romantic and passionately attached to Irenya, had appealed to the King to release her sister. I understood Cyrian well enough to know that no false sentimentality would prevent him from seeing the cold truth; that going to Château Borisof as his trusted envoy I had not only loved Irenya myself, but had permitted her to fall in love with me. He would set her free, too proud to do otherwise, and face alone the storm of scandal and ridicule that would sweep Balka from end to end. For a moment the streets with their gay decorations floated in a dazzle of confused color.

"Monseigneur is unwell?" Pierre's voice inquired.

I opened my eyes to find him leaning down from the box.

## A BALKAN TANGLE

"No; drive faster," I ordered.

"Monseigneur, where?"

"To the palace, of course," I said impatiently.

But the brief conversation had done me good and dispelled the confusion of thought bred in the dark, lonely hours on the train. Mademoiselle Borisof was sufficiently practical either to tell Cyrian before the engagement was made public, or to remain silent. I was foolish indeed to heed Kalrov's malice.

At the palace I found them expecting me, early as it was. The King wished to see me the instant I arrived, no matter at what hour, they informed me. Kalrov was right so far, then, and I sighed wearily. If Cyrian had really wanted his ring (and it was a medieval institution to which Balka still clung), I would have a *mauvais quart d'heure*. He possessed all the hereditary Stanief temper, and, having a share of it also, my self-command was always severely taxed when I had to listen to one of his lectures.

He was in his study alone and I heard him give an exclamation at my name.

"My dear Paul," he said, rising as I entered and putting his hands on my shoulders. "My dear Paul."

There was no mistaking the deep affection of his tone and gesture. Under the sudden revulsion of feeling my new-found love for Irenya was overwhelmed in the tide of this older love which had been everything to me as long as I could remember.

"You are happy?" I asked involuntarily, searching his face for the joy I had missed. I felt it would be well lost if it had come to him.

"Very happy; thanks to you," he said quietly.

He took his chair again, waving me to one opposite. In the silence that followed a curious restraint crept between us, as if some idea of which neither would speak stood near us like a visible presence.

"I have to apologize for my carelessness in keeping your ring, Sire," I said at last.

"I have not needed it," he answered, studying me intently beneath his lashes.

"Nevertheless I will return it; if you have no other commission for me," I said, laying the ring on the table before him.

He accepted it absently and slipped it on his finger.

"No," he said. "No further commission, *mon ami*. I have just finished untangling the last."

"Sire?" I exclaimed.

"Exactly. You have perhaps forgotten how to read, recently?"

I looked at him in absolute amazement.

"Or perhaps my letter never reached you. My dear Paul, pray whom did you select as my wife?"

"Mademoiselle Borisof, Sire, as you directed," I said, rising to my feet.

"You did nothing of the kind," he retorted. "You betrothed me to Mademoiselle Irenya."

"But, Sire—" I commenced dizzily.

"There is no but about it," he interrupted coolly. "It is a fact. Where was your usual good sense, Paul, to choose that pretty child for my queen? One glance at her sister is enough to perceive the intellect, the self-poise and tact so necessary in this turbulent court. Dorine is the companion I dreamed of, but never expected to gain. Have you not read her books? When you told me her *nom-de-plume* I recognized a kindred mind. What is the matter?" he stopped abruptly. "Are you ill, Paul?"

"No, Sire," I answered, but I was glad to sink into my chair again.

He looked at me keenly.

"I am afraid you have had a bad week at Ivral," he said with a return of the gentleness with which he had greeted me. "It is not my fault, *mon ami*. Dorine did not tell me how you felt toward Irenya until yesterday. I suppose it took her that long to realize I was very much like other people. If I have teased you a little it was to keep you occupied until someone I sent for arrived, and I think—"

"Mademoiselle Irenya Borisof," announced an attendant.

"Precisely," said Cyrian.